

HELENA CITY, MT 59301
MON. - FRI., 4,050
AUG 09 1991
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Superfund sites

Martz visits Libby, tours cleanup areas

By TOM LACEKY
Associated Press Writer

LIBBY (AP) — Gov. Judy Martz showed the flag during a whirlwind visit here Wednesday, assuring residents that state government cares about them and urging them to care about each other.

"I just beg you all to try to work together," Martz told some 200 people at a three-hour afternoon "listening session." She said the same thing in a variety of ways through her day-long visit.

"Quit criticizing, complaining and condemning," she said later.

"Don't separate yourselves," she said at another stop. "What will you have in three years if you can't

speak to your neighbors?"

She was alluding to divisions within the community over questions of cleaning up decades of asbestos contamination and whether the town should be declared a Superfund site.

Dozens of asbestos-related deaths and hundreds of illnesses in Libby have been linked in recent years to the W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mine, which shut down in



MARTZ: Urges cooperation

1990. Vermiculite ore from the Libby mine contained tremolite asbestos, which is considered a major health threat when airborne. The vermiculite was used for years to make a variety of products, including household insulation.

Three more years is the outside time period needed to complete cleanup of the area's nine sites of major contamination, said Paul Peronard, the Environmental Protection Agency's on-site coordinator.

The EPA is likely to propose listing the town and adjacent sites on its National Priorities List, which would provide additional federal cleanup help. As governor, Martz

has near-veto power over the designation, but says she has not decided.

Peronard and the EPA got a standing ovation at the afternoon session. Nearly every speaker denounced Grace, calling the company deceitful and untrustworthy.

At a brief meeting later, members of the Libby Chamber of Commerce and other business people voiced major concerns about the financial troubles that a Superfund designation could cause.

Martz said her chief accomplishment on the trip was to assure the people of Libby that state government cares and is ready to help.

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Peronard escorted Martz to several cleanup sites and explained the problems and the cleaning process.

Lerah Parker broke down and wept as she showed Martz photos of a 21-acre site along the Kootenai River just north of town where she and her husband, Mel, had operated Raintree Nursery. They bought the site, including some buildings, from Grace in 1993, before the asbestos contamination was discovered. They

learned of it in newspaper reports.

The site now is a major cleanup project, a dirt and rock field empty of greenery and filled with dirt-moving machines. The Parkers have been out for two years, but the EPA says they may be able to return late this year.

In town, Millwork West still operates in a building at Grace's old export plant. Owners Judy and Mel Burnett buttonholed the governor to charge that Grace did a poor job of cleaning the

site, literally throwing some equipment and tools into a steel shed still covered with asbestos.

At the high school, EPA is removing vermiculite tailings from the running track around the football stadium. For years, the school district used Grace's mine tailings as a track surface.

Contamination now extends under the stadium, which was jacked up so crews could remove the contaminated soil under it, Peronard said.

"I've never jacked up a stadium before, but it turns out it

wasn't so hard," Peronard said.

Powerful vacuum trucks were sucking up some 6 inches of contaminated soil from under the stadium on Wednesday.

The visit to Libby was the first by Martz since she became governor in January. Although she had met previously with community leaders in Helena, Martz had been criticized by some for not personally visiting the town until now. She noted repeatedly during the day that she visited at last four times last year while she was lieutenant governor.